

“DUAL CAREER”: CASE STUDY IN ELITE SPORTS

SIMONA OROS¹, IACOB HANȚIU^{1*}

ABSTRACT. During their high performance sports career, athletes commit themselves to fulfil several roles, being at the same time students, family members or employees, being challenged to meet the requirements of a dual career: an active, sportive and educational/professional one. The timespan of a “dual career” for a sportive is a complex one and requires effort and sacrifices, as well as support from the family, school and sporting environment that should help in the achievement of a balanced development. The present endeavour is a case study which wishes to present a global image of the educational, professional formation route, developed in parallel with the high performance sports activity, all framed within the concept of “dual career”. It is a qualitative research in which the interview method has been used, the analysed case being considered a model of success in high performance sports. The conclusions of this study emphasize the complexity of the phenomenon, as well as the need to responsibly manage the two careers, involving both the sportive and educational/professional formation.

Keywords: *dual career, high performance sport, elite sport, education, professional formation.*

REZUMAT. “Dual Career”: studiu de caz în sportul de elită. De-a lungul carierei sportive de performanță, sportivii își asumă angajamentul de a îndeplini mai multe roluri, putând fi în același timp elevi/studenți, membri de familie sau angajați, fiind provocați să gestioneze cerințele unei duble cariere: sportivă și educațională/profesională. Perioada “dublei cariere” pentru un sportiv este una complexă care necesită efort și sacrificii, dar și suport al mediului familial, școlar sau sportiv care trebuie să susțină o dezvoltare echilibrată. Prezentul demers este un studiu de caz ce își propune să prezinte o imagine de ansamblu al traseului educațional, de formare profesională, dezvoltat în paralel cu activitatea sportivă de performanță, încadrat sub conceptul de “dublă carieră”. Este o cercetare calitativă în care s-a folosit metoda interviului, cazul analizat fiind considerat un model de reușită în sportul de înaltă performanță. Concluziile acestui studiu scot în evidență complexitatea fenomenului, dar și nevoia de gestionare cu responsabilitate a celor două cariere – sportivă și educațională/formare profesională.

Cuvinte-cheie: *dublă carieră, sport de performanță, sportiv de elită, educație, formare profesională*

¹ Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Physical Education and Sports Doctoral School

* Corresponding Author: iacob_hantiu@gmail.com

Introduction

In the contemporary society, high performance sport has experienced a great expansion, being assessed as a phenomenon with important functions in the human development through the implied socio-economic implications, contributing to the accomplishment of Europe 2020 strategic objectives. The complexity of life and the challenges of the contemporary world have as consequence the rethinking of the role and importance of factors which contribute to the achievement of education throughout the lifespan. The European Union admits and supports the role of sports in the domain of education, the year 2004 being proclaimed as the year of education through sports.

The concept of “dual career” in high performance sports was “conceived out of the necessity help the athletes in planning and time management between sport, education, gaining financial resources and social life” (<http://www.dualcareer.com>) and promoted by institutions concerned to support athletes in the development of high performance sport in parallel with education and professional formation.

The importance of “dual career” is emphasized by the European Commission (2011) and the *White Book of Sports*, where aspects are approached referring to the sports development in the context of social, cultural and economic changes “in order to ensure the integration of professional athletes on the labour market at the end of their sportive careers... to provide to the young athletes a formation for a “dual career” (The White Book of Sports, 2007, p. 6).

The purpose of this study is to explore the complex process of “dual career” in high performance sports, to line out an overall image of this phenomenon experienced by elite athletes.

The objective of the research aims at identifying the factors that interfere in the management of the high performance sportive activity and the educational, professional formation one, with the description of the specific stages, covered coherently in successfully combining the two careers.

Method

The methodological approach of this research finds its place in a pilot study that explores the sportive activity period in parallel with the educational and professional formation period. The used method is a qualitative one – case study, “research method which takes as its subject a singular case or a few examples selected from a social entity” (Marshall & co., 2003, p. 601). The case study is a method proper for the complex analysis of a person or a group, as “pattern” of a phenomenon, of life experience with the characteristic features and emotions. Case studies show “how it would be” in a special situation, in order to capture reality and to describe thoroughly the participants – their experiences, thoughts and feelings in a certain situation” (Jones, Gratton, 2003, p.254).

For data collection, the interview was used, having as instrument a semi structured interview guide (where the discussion topics were established without imposing a certain approach order). A preliminary meeting was established with the subject in order to receive the participation agreement and to be presented with data referring to the research topic and purpose. Then, in mutual agreement, it was established the date, hour and place of the interview. The subject chosen for this study is an elite sportive, Olympic champion in 2012, who practices, as sport branch, target shooting. The interview was approached as a “life story” of the subject, recorded on electronic support and transcribed for analysis. The recorded data processing was made with the content analysis technique.

Results and analyses

The situation of athletes who have reached the end of their high performance career becomes analysis subject for researchers from many countries, starting off from “the reality many of the elite athletes must face is that they are little or insufficiently rewarded financially so they could live decently out of their sportive activity” (Stambulova, 2007 cited by Dawn, 2013, p.1). This situation emphasizes the necessity to pay more attention to the management of “dual career”, to the period during which the sportive must successfully combine the academic career with the sportive one. Generally, athletes begin their sportive careers by experimenting several sports branches, first going through an “initiation” period, as Cote, Baker and Abernathy (2003) call it, period during which the participants are “willing to try various sports in order to realize which is fit for them, which they enjoy the most or if they have a certain talent. This period is named initiation or trial/sampling” (Keegan, Harwood, Spray, Lavallee, 2014, p.2).

For the subject of the present study, the first contact with target shooting “*was a child’s play*” at the age of 13, following a selection at school where he “*was one of those who fired the rifle well and remained*, although, there were other attempts to practice other sports as well. Athletes can be motivated by extrinsic factors, such as rewards, acknowledgement” (Ryan&Deci, 2007 apud Pelletir, Rocchi, Vallerand, Deci, Ryan, 2013, p.1), and “*the first medals obtained in a national championship*” consolidate the idea of performance and activity continuation. The transition to another life stage also implies a change of environment which in “the domain of sports, from a young age, from junior to the adult phase, it can lead to additional stress in the case of athletes” (Petitapas & co., 1997, Engstrom, 2011 apud Ābeļkalns, Geske, 2013, p. 7). The responsibility in training, thoroughness, satisfaction to practice what they like, the recorded progress and results help the sportive not to feel the passing from one age category to another as if it were a situation which required accommodation to new situations – “*in my case, I had to compete in the juniors’ category when I was very young, after that, I had to compete directly in the seniors’ and I didn’t feel it as passage*”. The selection for

the national lot is perceived by the subject as acknowledgement of his work and added value in his development – *“the national lot meant very much and a different coach”*.

“In sports, motivation has a crucial role, meaning that the sportive’s success depends significantly on the performers’ will to mentally focus, as well as on the physical effort targeted in excellence” (Moran, 2012, p.44). The seriousness of work, dedication, they make the effort become achievements, *“multiple national champion, then the first selection in the national lot which meant a competition in the Czech Republic, where the competition was in an age category bigger than mine, I won the competition and the national record; emotionally, for me it meant something extraordinary, it was a turning point when morally I became more self-confident”*.

Even though “the external stimulants, such as money and status are connected to the athletes’ performances” (Cresswell & Eklund, 2005, Pelletier, Fortier, Vallerand, & Brière, 2001 apud Keegan & co., 2014, p. 3), for the respondent there are more relevant the performance experiences in competition context and to surpass his own limits.

The support of the sportive environment, of the coach is defining in a sportive’s career, marking his personal development. The subject appreciates the coach’s role as being *“crucial, without him, I wouldn’t be at this level”*; he is the one who believes in him, valorizing his potential – *“the coach made me compete with the strong ones, he trusted me and it probably was some talent too”*. The training programs which must be made by an elite sportive require a lot of time, intense physical effort – *“for me, performance training means all day long”*, energy – *“target shooting consumes very much mental energy, it requires specific training”*, high capacity of permanent concentration – *“I can train in various ways, I do not need a specific place”*.

The demands imposed to high performance athletes are strict, rigorous so as they must be completely dedicated in order to achieve excellence in sports. This influences the sportive’s life, his living style regarding the necessary time and responsibility to accomplish the role of being at the same time sportive, student, then spouse and parent. Under these circumstances, the support of the family is a significant one, *“major, it is impossible without the support of the family, you cannot succeed in anything, you cannot practice high performance sports”*, although the sportive and educational components have priority in a sportive’s life.

Generally, elite athletes are associated with obtaining substantial earnings, a high social status and a different life style. The interviewed sportive, being at a high performance level after years of hard work, is satisfied by the obtained financial benefits – *“the financial income from sports provides a decent living for me, I am pleased; generally, it is a good living from sports at this level”*. High performance sport provides the placement in a budgetary institution with “taking out of activity” (he only takes part in the sportive activity), financial stimulants (allowance, prizes), the possibility to travel in the country and abroad, new social networks,

material benefits, a high social status, a specific life style. Thus, high performance sport becomes a way of living – *“this is what I live, sport, and when I say sport, I only say target shooting”*.

The respondent’s sportive career had continuity, without interruptions caused by accidents or other incidents. Although there were critical moments, *“failures, because, a good result obtained at a certain age, after a period, if you return or maintain yourself at the same level, is a failure”*, periods in which *“it is very difficult to maintain yourself at a high performance level”*, the sportive did not consider these as withdrawal reasons. Success and failure, reflected in the result of the action, are variables to which the sportive retrospects himself all along his high performance career, positively or negatively influencing the feeling of competence, confidence, efficiency, the perception regarding autonomy and social belonging (Nuț, 2009).

The high aspirations, blocked in surpassing his own limits, may constitute reasons to give up for a sportive – *“I had many moments when I wanted to give up, when nothing was right, I could not reach performance and you may think that it was not the case anymore, but I did not quit”*. The critical moments from a sportive’s life can be appreciated as turning points necessary for the human development, just as the predictable transitions, changes which mark a new way of living in the next development stage (Stambulova, 2011). The greatest achievement of a high performance sportive is to participate to the Olympic Games and obtaining a medal is a dream come true. *“The performance objectives encourage athletes to focus on the relevant task information and on the controllable actions”* (Moran, 2012, p.155). After years of sportive activity, with a sometimes exhausting training, with remarkable performances, being *“world champion and world vice champion, obtaining the bronze medal at the European championship, medals at world cups, national records”*, his efforts were rewarded – *“the Olympic title came after 16 years of work”*.

The emotional load with which he speaks about these events, tells us more than his words – *“it cannot be described what I felt there, on the podium”*. The great performances do not just come with advantages, the responsibility keep a high level, the pressure from everybody around is not easy to take *“there is a certain pressure everybody because they all expect everything to be very well, although it is very hard, to always be the best”*. *“Many coaches and athletes think that concentration and the capacity to literally concentrate on the given task, while ignoring distractions, is an essential condition in order to successfully perform in sport”* (Moran, 2012, p. 128). With rigorous, specific training, the sportive reaches a level where he succeeds in overcoming certain difficult moments, even if *“against your will, you become distracted, various problems occur which you have to solve and thus it is difficult to be mentally there all the time; if I do not feel very strongly this pressure, it does not mean that it is not there, I manage to protect myself from such situations”*.

The social mobility (sportive environment), reflecting that the sportive is legitimated in several clubs, is influenced by extrinsic motivational factors which provide him with better living, training and social protection conditions – *“I started my initiation in Focsani, then I was at SC Dinamo Bucharest and at present, I am in Iasi with double legitimation; I left Focsani because I moved on to seniors and the other reason was getting a job”*.

The concern for professional formation, in the case of our subject, occurred mostly from the wish to get over the critical moments in the high performance activity, the academic training supporting the sportive training – *“at a certain point I felt that I should have seen a psychologist and that was when I studied the psychology faculty; I felt that something was missing from performance and training, it was a part of the training which I could not cover”*.

The graduated faculty provides him with the theoretical competences which help him make progress in his sportive activity, but he is aware that it will be very difficult to work in the domain after retiring from his sportive career, considering the long period of time which has passed since graduation and the inexistence of a training stage which should provide practical experience – *“I have no practice in the field, up to now I have not deepened my professional training because I haven't had time; sport requires a lot of time and one cannot do well both activities”*. The orientation, the decision to continue the studies at higher level, was a personal one, the sportive only having the support of the family.

The sports club did not get involved as his sportive activity was not affected – *“the club did not get involved in my preoccupation, did not support me, ... I went to faculty in the private system because during the admission period I was in competitions ... I did not use the facilities referring to class attendance...I sat for most of my exams during the session of remained exams”*. If at the beginning of the sportive career, school was the priority, the hierarchy changes once the great performances are obtained, high performance sport coming on first – *“in managing the sportive and educational activities, time was the only impediment ... you cannot undertake the same effort when your mind is at trainings, basically, you cannot make two activities at the same level, therefore school fell on the second place”*. “Compared to traditional students, sportive students have to face additional challenges and energy consumption in accomplishing good academic and sportive performance” (Shuman, 2009; Gaston-Gayles, 2005; Gatmen, 2012 cited by Corrado & co., 2012, p.54)

The encouragement and support of elite athletes to continue their higher education as professional training is also reflected in the official statistics accomplished by the British Universities and Sports Colleges which show that “during the past 20 years, 60% of the teams in Great Britain have been “products” of the higher education system. During the Olympic Games in London – 2012, there was a series of sports which were very well represented by sportive students, such as pentathlon (100%), female polo (100%), canoeing (90%), grass hockey (87.5%), athletics (79.5%), swimming (54%)” (Dawn, 2013, p.4).

Conclusions

The analysis of the recorded results lead to the formation of certain relevant conclusions which emphasize the issue of dual career in high performance sports:

➤ The practicing of elite high performance sport requires a high consumption of time, energy, concentration, dedication, which is (sometimes) a barrier in the educational development and professional formation;

➤ The choice and concentration on the sportive activity to the detriment of academic preoccupations is supported by intrinsic and extrinsic motivations illustrated by the perspective of success in elite sport, by the recorded performances and the obtained benefits;

➤ The legislation referring to study facilities for elite sportive students does not provide a proper framework regarding class attendance and sitting for exams; the inexistence of study programs (particularized ones) correlated with the centralized and competition training periods determine the orientation of athletes towards private institutions where they find more tolerance;

➤ The professional formation certified by obtaining a higher studies graduation diploma does not represent a guarantee of getting on the labour market in the studied domain, considering the long period of time between graduation and retirement from the sportive career, without the implication of athletes in the professional environment or professional practice;

➤ The sportive mobility is determined by (extrinsic) motivational factors which provide financial comfort, better living conditions and social protection;

➤ The hierarchy of life priorities is reconsidered proportionally with the recorded sportive performances and the benefits derived from this activity.

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